



Parent's Perspective: Living Through Spring 2020 in Rural America

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I sit here thinking about the past 6 months and it feels like such a blur, but March of 2020 is one month I will never forget.

I have three sons, two of whom were in school last year. They loved their teachers and enjoyed seeing their friends, but my kindergartener was struggling with a new ADHD diagnosis. His teacher was making accommodations to meet his needs. He was struggling to learn to read and the teacher and the paraeducator in the class were working hard to work with him, and each of the other students. Overall, though, school was working pretty well for him and our family had a good routine. My husband went to work early, so I woke the boys up and off we would go. It wasn't perfect, but it worked.



As a mom, I was already doing a lot even before March 2020. By the time we were out the door in the mornings, I was usually sweating and taking deep, calming breaths. I spent a large amount of time in the school myself as the PTA president, arranging assemblies, events and fundraisers for the school. At home, in addition to parenting, I worked as a case manager full-time and had been with my company for 12 years. Some days I worked from home, others I visited clients in their homes.

Then the news came that schools were closing because of COVID-19. In my head, I prepared for a maximum of two weeks that the children would be home from school. I was excited to have them home for a bit--and also annoyed that they closed schools. It was a gift to me that I was an experienced teleworker and that my company had protocols in place when office closures hit. Watching the news, I felt everyone was overreacting and things would go back to normal shortly. Boy, was I wrong, and as the days went on, I learned about and accepted the seriousness of COVID-19.

The email came that we would be doing learning packets at home. I imagined living in a more populated area would make it much easier by having access to high speed internet and broadband. Those students would have more options, such as online programs that were only accessible with reliable internet. We had the option to pick up packets at school or download them and print. I chose to do paper packets because our internet is very slow, and there is only one modem in our home, in my office, that will allow a video connection. The school had a very organized pick-up line to pick these packets up, and they provided supplies needed for the students to do their work.

Being a PTA mom paid off. Through the PTA Facebook page, I was able to arrange some Zoom meetings for the students to see one another and say hi and chat. It made the quarantine a little less boring. I tried fun arts and crafts activities, some of which were successes and others were failures. We got in lots of fun outside play time with fresh air and read some good books. I am thankful for living in a rural area for this reason. Right out our back door, we have a large yard, pool, and driveway where the kids can exercise and play, and a big garden that is fun for digging in the mud. Friends who live in big cities have told me how tough it is not being able to get the kids outside to exercise and have recess. Parks and public areas being closed makes it rough on them.

Being an at-home teacher all of a sudden was hard, however. For my family, it worked best if I worked with the boys in the middle of the day after my meetings and Skype calls for work and while my youngest took his nap. (I had pulled my youngest from his daycare to prevent any chance of exposure to the illness.) We started school work around 12 pm. I am blessed my 3rd grader was able to work on his own so I could focus on my kindergartener. If my 3rd grader had a question, his teacher was available at the drop of a hat. We could call her or Google Meet with her, and she would show on white board how to do the steps to his math work or answer questions about reading. She was amazing! To be honest, it has been a very long time since I have done fractions other than when cooking. She was able to teach him in a way that made sense to him. We sent her uploads of his work and she would provide feedback. I had no concerns about him falling behind.

For my kindergartener, it was a different story. I sat with him to do his work and sent his teacher pictures. She sent him encouraging messages in return. I could see him doing well in math, but I could also see his struggles related to ADHD. He had trouble concentrating, trouble reading. I am not educated in the phonics way of teaching. I was not able to help him. We worked through online learning apps, but that was not enough. He needed his teacher. She was available whenever we reached out to her, but it didn't feel like enough. She has been in the field for many years and understood what he needed and what would work for him. It was hard for me to not be able to help my own child read. It kept me awake many nights worrying about him, his future, and his education. One day he told me I was the best teacher ever. I cried so hard that night after he went to sleep, thinking that maybe I was doing okay. That maybe I wasn't failing.

When I finished the hands-on part of helping them during the day, I would try to get back on the computer to do my own work. Again, my employer was very accommodating. We were given the option of utilizing 80 hours of leave at two-thirds pay to attend to our

children's needs since schools were closed. I felt I needed to use this time to be able to give my kids the attention and help they needed with their work. With the kids home, I was only able to work about 15 hours out of a 40-hour work week. I didn't feel like I could make our life work without using the leave. I had to take time to sit with my children during class or help them with school work, and if my children had a class Google Meet video scheduled, I needed to take leave from work again so they could use my computer. Our internet wasn't strong enough to have more than one person online at a time.

I was trying to keep up with work and wishing each day I had more time to dedicate to my boys' needs. It was depressing. It made me feel incompetent. I reminded myself of our blessings: I was not an essential employee who had to leave home to work. But it has been hard. Some days I had to lock my office door for a call, only to hear my 1-year old screaming "MOMMY!" from the other side. Skype calls with my coworkers were interrupted by him climbing on my lap. (Luckily, my coworkers enjoy a friendly baby wave in the camera). Some of the boys' homework ended up scribbled on or glued together. It was almost impossible. My 1-year-old became even more bonded to me and needed his eyes on me at all times. It wore on me daily. I was being pulled in so many directions and could feel my mental health being jeopardized. I am very grateful for friends and family who are my support system for pep talks and words of encouragement, but it is hard.

In the end, I ended up using all 80 hours of the leave my employer offered because it was just too darn hard to do it all. Here I was a full-time mom and an employee and, during these trying times, getting less pay. Once the 80 hours of leave was gone, my employer offered 400 hours of Expanded Federal Medical Leave, again at two-thirds pay. It is a relief that I will not have to go completely unpaid or resign to help my children with their academic needs. I know other families who do not have this option and attempt to do all their work in the evenings.

Through all of this I know I didn't have it bad. There were kids going hungry in our school. The school principal and staff were working hard to get these students food so they would have something to keep them healthy. I made several trips to the store for the PTA to purchase food for them. The school had been providing breakfast and lunch to these families. Not having those meals was a giant loss.

There were also the kids being left home alone because the parents had no choice but to go to work or get fired. There are a limited number of day care providers in this area. Once COVID-19 hit, some closed their in-home centers, others' enrollment limits were maxed out. I had been on a waiting list for an infant spot with my youngest from the week after I found out I was pregnant until he turned 7 months when there was an opening.

There were kids in abusive homes that now had no escape. Normally these students are in school where the staff and counselor can see the signs and report as needed.

Our school is different from the other elementary schools in our county, because we have many homes without internet. The school was able to give out mobile hotspots, but guess

what? Our school has many homes without internet because there is NO service in our area. We were blessed to have staff members at the school that were going to students' homes to make sure they had food and their assignments and to ask if there was anything they needed.

So, in the end I am grateful my kids got what they needed. But as a parent, I never felt I was giving them the education they needed or deserved. We need equity in internet access throughout our county. Broadband for everyone would help make this situation successful. I would like those making the decisions about our county and state to visit and see what it is like at my house; for example, to make a phone call using a cell phone with unstable signals or experience what it's like to have a Google Meet where everyone freezes and participants continuously log in and out. It is not ideal. We make it work, but my kids need to be in school.

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